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ABSTRACT

A graduate student who was the only composition person in a two semester teaching seminar experienced the dilemma of defining and establishing that identity in the midst of a classroom struggle between cultural studies and literary theorists on one side and creative writers on the other. The factious teaching seminar mirrored the fact that English departments are becoming more theory-centered and that composition specialists must identify those ideological pedagogies they uphold in their classrooms. The seminar of new teaching assistants engaged in clearly dichotomous conversations: those using ideological language occupied one camp and those using writerly language occupied another. As she struggled to find her own voice within this din of competing discourses born of disciplinary diversity, the composition person began to develop a pedagogical stance that cultivates student recognition and utilization of the power of language through teaching practices based on concepts of authority and authorship. This teacher's perception of herself as someone who writes, as well as her teacherly intuition about the practicality of concentrating on students and the writing they produce led her to appreciate and adopt the more writerly language spoken by the creative writers. (SAM)

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CCCC SESSION TITLE: "Looking Closely at Teacher-Training--Negotiating Three Scenes of Instruction"

SPEECH TOPIC: "The Voice of a Composition Person in the Midst of Disciplinary Diversity"

As the sole graduate student during two semesters of Teaching Seminar last year who declared herself to be a composition person, I experienced the dilemma of defining and establishing that identity in the midst of a classroom struggle between cultural studies and literary theorists on one side and creative writers on the other. Because this so closely mirrors the struggle within the discipline of English at large, the first semester of that Seminar not only represented the scene of my introduction to the teaching of composition, but also, more significantly, my introduction to the challenges of positioning myself within the larger discipline. From our readings of texts that analyzed the disciplinary practices and politics of composition, I developed an awareness early on that the field is steadily becoming more theory-centered, and this awareness led me to a reluctant respect for the ideological language of the cultural studies and literary theorists. However, my perception of myself as someone who writes, as well as my teacherly intuition about the practicality of concentrating on students and the writing they produce led me to appreciate and adopt the more writerly language spoken by the creative writers.

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While my Teaching Seminar classmates never made me feel that

I was expected to speak on behalf of my chosen field, I did feel that, if I were going to call myself a composition person, I needed to know what ideologies I was supposed to be upholding in that factious classroom. I had come to graduate school with the goal of engaging in issues of pedagogy, and my subsequent decision to cultivate an interest in composition was an easy one, because, though I have never considered myself a creative writer, I have always enjoyed writing and helping others with their own writing. I was unable to articulate it then, but I had a clear sense that I wanted my freshman writing students to know how to use words in ways that enabled them to clearly state their positions as readers and writers. What it all boiled down to was that I wanted them to share my own recognition of the power of language, both from their own and from other writers' pens, and to be able to use that power to speak to their readers convincingly. The problem for me was trying to determine ways to teach that recognition and utilization, and I thought the Teaching Seminar would be the place for me to talk about that problem.

I found it difficult to talk about anything there, however, since the key word in describing that scene is, as I phrased it a few moments ago, "factious". Even though the placement of the twenty-seven of us freshman composition instructors around a long seminar table seemed to physically signify that we were all on common ground, ideologically nothing could have been further from the truth, and this became clear as soon as dialogue began. We had all come to that classroom from diverse disciplines and levels of

education: some of us were Ph.D candidates, while others were Masters candidates; some of us were interested in the discipline of literature, some of us in cultural theory, and some of us in composition, while others were interested in creative writing. With the passage of time, it has become clearer to me that the make-up of the Teaching Seminar was a microcosm of not only our own English Department, but also of English Departments across the country, and that the disciplinary diversity I found myself in the midst of there was only the beginning of what I might find during my entire academic career. Within the confines of that seminar room, however, in spite of this complicated multiformity, there was a clear dichotomy in our conversations between what I have already designated as ideological language in one camp, and writerly language in the other.

I am only figuratively using the word "our" to describe those seminar conversations, because I very rarely participated in them. As I often do in my moments of discomfort with controversy, I chose to clam up, but in my silence I listened to the various factions, trying to decide how I might find ways to articulate my own ideas about teaching. Because I hadn't been exposed to theoretical texts in my educational past, terminology like "hegemony" and "post-structuralism" and references to people like Foucault and Derrida meant nothing to me; but this was the language of my literary and cultural theorist classmates. While I respected them for their comprehension and utilization of a discourse I knew I would be hearing more of as I progressed in the field of composition, I was

reluctant to do so. I kept wanting a conversation where we considered more practical issues of problem solving--for students of writing and for teachers of writing.

I think that desire was prompted by my conviction that while we may be scholars, theoreticians, and so on, there can be no college instructors or university professors without students. That conviction, along with the fact that, as I said earlier, I have always enjoyed writing and working with writers, also led me to appreciate the creative writing voices in the Teaching Seminar, because they presented themselves as struggling writers who were trying to negotiate ways to teach the struggling writers in their composition classes. After all, I was having similar difficulties--as a graduate student who was struggling to find my speaking voice in the seminar while simultaneously trying to negotiate ways to teach my own struggling undergraduate students to strengthen their writing voices. The arguments offered by the creative writers intrigued me because, instead of generating confusion in my mind, they answered questions like, "who or what is a writer?" "what are their problems, and how do they solve them?". I am inspired to call theirs a more writerly language, because, at least for me, it offered intelligible ways to think through my own composition classroom practices.

Though I seldom successfully found my voice in the Teaching Seminar classroom, it grew progressively louder in my own scene of instruction. Listening to the creative writers in the seminar gave me a language to speak, which, in turn, allowed me to act on my

teacherly intuition about the practicality of concentrating on students and the writing they produce. One example of this was my steadily developing conception of my students as authors, though I was training them for academic, and not creative, writing, of course; and I found ways to cultivate their recognition and utilization of the power of language through teaching practices based on the concepts of authority and authorship. I wanted them to know that becoming stronger writers would provide them with the authority to make the same moves that were made by the authors of the published texts they read, discussed and wrote about in their composition class.

Interestingly, some of my classroom practices came about as my own indirect response, or reaction, to the theorists whom I never felt comfortable enough to argue with in Teaching Seminar. Those people rarely knew about my responses, which is too bad, because, though I don't profess to have had the definitive solutions to many of the problems we shared as teachers, I'm sure my observations could have been useful, if for no other reason than to generate thought. Clearly, we were placed around that seminar table to share both pedagogical and disciplinary ideologies, and if every voice does not participate in that sharing, the reservoir of words is diminished, and subsequently the possibility of reaching a common ground, which, I believe, must be based, first and foremost, on a common language, is also diminished. In any case, my ability to sympathize with my own students' potential frustration as they tried to understand confusing concepts led me

to use a classroom practice which began as a way of dealing with my own frustration and confusion as I listened to my theorist colleagues' ideologies. The policy, plain and simple, was that, in any situation where I could make an abstract idea more concrete for my students by demonstrating it to them, I would do so.

For instance, when I found that my sermons about the importance of using quotations and paraphrases in their papers to support their readings, or interpretations, of a text were falling on deaf ears, I decided to set up a debate so they could see the process in action. One side, made up of three students who agreed on one particular interpretation of a passage chosen from the text, argued in favor of that interpretation. The other side, made up of another three students in agreement on an alternative interpretation, argued in favor of that one. The only rules were that they had to utilize pieces of the text to help them make their points. I stepped out of the procedure altogether, and it was up to the class to decide who argued the most convincingly. The lively exchange which followed visibly illustrated the effectiveness of speaking in a way that clearly states one's position. Shortly thereafter, the power of language they recognized in the debate gradually began to manifest itself in their writing.

As a teacher and a student, I already recognized this power of language, so I had a jump on my own students. However, my students ended up ahead of me in the sense that they, as new writers in the

university, gained the opportunity to learn ways of utilizing written language to declare their position. I, on the other hand, as a new professional in the academy lost the opportunity to learn ways of using my voice to negotiate my own pedagogical and ideological position. Of course, I did gain some of the knowledge which could only come from listening to other graduate students and new teaching assistants speak, but I gained nothing else from adapting a skill I've always had -- which is keeping my mouth shut and my eyes and ears open. My chance to learn the negotiating skills which are vital to any academic professional's success was postponed, and thus I invite all teachers to think about the importance of constructing a classroom atmosphere that welcomes everyone's voice.

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